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Steven Solomon, *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization*

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Steven Solomon, *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2010 (596 pp.), ISBN 978-0-06-054831-5, US\$17.99.

Reviewed by Brooklynn J. Wynveen

“Water has always been man’s most indispensable natural resource” (Solomon 2010:3). Despite its essential nature, water has often been mismanaged, misallocated, undervalued, and squandered by the many societies that have comprised the civilized world. According to Solomon, and others, we have reached a point of global crisis in terms of both water quality and water quantity. In water-rich and water-poor societies alike, we are now squarely positioned in an age of water scarcity. As such, this book provides a timely warning for societies of today, all of which would benefit from a less frivolous view of water.

Solomon’s overarching thesis is that, “Throughout history, wherever water resources have been increased and made most manageable, navigable, and potable, societies have generally been robust and long enduring” (2010:15). Writing in a journalistic, narrative style, the author does not explicitly explain his methodology, although the text itself demonstrates the use of historical analysis, in which “researchers consider various sources of historical data such as historical texts, newspaper reports, diaries, and maps....to gain insights into social phenomena” (Wychel, Sengers, and Grinter 2006:37-38). The author successfully integrates many historical and current works—both academic and popular—to create “a cohesive framework and narrative” (551). It is this synthesis that constitutes the manuscript’s major contribution to the existing literature.

Many works focus on one civilization, era, or historical phenomenon. In contrast, Solomon details the rise and fall of many major and minor civilizations (e.g., Chinese, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Roman) and extending to the present day. He weaves a narrative that depicts water as a common thread, which is continuously interacting with economic, social, environmental, and political phenomena to direct the course of history. The detail (i.e., thick descriptions) provided allows readers to conclude for themselves that, indeed, the ability to access and manipulate water has played a substantial role in the history of civilization, albeit with several other social, economic, environmental, and political phenomena.

Among its strengths, the book spans millennia and all geographic regions of the world. The author's account is detailed, showing how the water landscape interacted with major historical events and figures of each time and place to influence the wealth and power structures thereof. The few notable weaknesses of the book relate to the author's treatment of the current global water crisis. First, although he notes several water-related challenges faced by the United States, the severity of those challenges is downplayed, particularly in comparison with the dire circumstances experienced in the relatively water-poor nations of the world. While it is true that much of the earth's population fares far worse than Americans in terms of access to, and quality of, freshwater resources, the author's portrayal of the United States as one of the world's "water haves" may actually contribute to a sense of denial among U.S. water users. Likewise, he seems to overemphasize the influence of several positive examples of change within the U.S. water use landscape, while underemphasizing the negative examples of water mismanagement still occurring across the nation. In fact, the author himself acknowledges the possibility that such a "water rich society" may become a "complacent onlooker" due to its "relative comfort" (Solomon 2010:492), as opposed to leveraging its water resource advantage for the greater good. The final weakness I would point out lies in the author's recommendations for how to best leverage such a strategic advantage. For instance, he almost seems to promote large-scale, industrial agriculture and its associated techniques (i.e., genetically-modified crops), due to their more "efficient" water use, in spite of potentially-harmful side effects of those agricultural practices. Meanwhile, two seemingly promising avenues for water resource management are ignored. First is the potential contribution of population growth restrictions in places such as Atlanta, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles, where water needs continuously outstrip the sustainable supply. Second, there is no mention of individual-level behavior change regarding responsible water use. In this respect, I think the author could have gone further to promote wise use of this valuable resource.

These few weaknesses notwithstanding, the book provided a highly educational synthesis of information that would be very difficult for a reader to acquire in a piecemeal fashion. Solomon's intended audience would likely include a broad range of readers, including academics, policy makers, water engineers, and even the public. Each of these groups would be well-served by reading this book, and heeding the warnings therein. The sheer amount of content would be too great to cover in any one college course, graduate or undergraduate, but it might give students a valuable breadth of background knowledge upon which instructors could selectively elaborate

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during a given semester. Overall, the book does what the title claims: it tells of the epic struggle for wealth, power, and civilization, through the lens of water.

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